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ABSTRACT

In Australia, an exploratory study was grounded in U. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective of human development and his principles of reciprocity, affective tone, and developmental opportunity and developmental risk. It used D. Baumrind's (1979) work on child rearing styles (authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive) to explore the effect of the different styles on parent-child communication, in particular, the use of the phrase "How many times have I told you..." The purpose of this was to understand how children learn, while adopting a Vygotskian perspective of cognitive development, utilizing his concepts of "guidance," "social dialogues," and "internalization." Vygotsky, like Bronfenbrenner, emphasized the importance of language to the development of higher intellectual processes. The research question involved the parental perception of the intent of the target phrase, their perception of the effect of the target phrase on the child's developing self-concept, and the level of parental understanding of the term "self-concept." Participants were nine mothers and nine fathers, one participant per family with a child aged four to five. Data analysis revealed that the parents generally viewed the parent as teacher and the child as learner, but they lacked understanding as to how a child learns. The second concern raised was the parents' confusion regarding the way adults communicate with young children--do parents realize the seriousness of negative feedback on the young child's development? When parents were asked about their understanding of what self-concept meant, 56% provided an appropriate definition, but only 33% gave both an appropriate definition of the term and the approximate age by which self-concept is mostly developed. (Contains 63 references. Child rearing styles storyboards are appended.) (NKA)

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by

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Paper presented at the Australian Institute of family Studies Conference
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Parent-Child Communication and its Perceived Effects on the Young Child's Developing Self-Concept

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Worldwide, the impact of globalisation has created major economic, technological, political and social changes which has had a profound effect on societies over the past twenty years (Aspin, 1994; Emy, 1993). As a result, Australia has been transformed into a complex society affecting the way parents raise their children. The modern family is becoming stretched, due to the fast pace of living, stress, and time constraints that can impact on the quality of parent-child interactions (Mustard & McCain, 1999:39; Bornstein, n.d.). In addition, the traditional autocratic parenting style is being challenged due to society's move towards a more democratic style of parenting in accordance with United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, ratified by Australia in 1991 (Hutchins & Sims, 1999; Balson, 1994; Bornstein, n.d.). As parents only want the best for their children, this shift has caused further stress and confusion as to their parenting role and to what is expected by society (Miller, 1990; Bornstein, n.d.). As a consequence of society's high expectations, parents "feel concerned and often their worry is passed on to the children" who in turn may "have very high expectations of themselves and become extremely tense and frightened of failure" (Roe, 1999:20).

As parents are the primary socialisers of their children, especially in the first five years, they feel responsible for ensuring that their child measures up to societal, cultural, familial and parental expectations (Bigner, 1994; Gonzalez-Mena, 1993; Miller, 1990). Parents have a major influence on the child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development (Bigner, 1994; Bornstein, n.d.). They are the role models from whom children imitate and learn about themselves, their family and the community they live in (Marion, 1999; Bigner, 1994). According to Bigner (1994) there are five main aims of socialisation, the first one being to help children develop a healthy self-concept. Another important aim was to ensure children are taught social skills — manners; and technical skills — reading and writing, that society deems appropriate and necessary for children to learn in order to function effectively as adults (Bigner, 1994:50).

This study was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective of human development and his principles of reciprocity, affective tone, and developmental opportunity and developmental risk (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992), as the means to understanding mothers and fathers' perception of one

aspect of parent-child communication in the phrase *how many times have I told you?* This approach recognises that the child "does not develop in a vacuum" but, rather, influences and is influenced by events occurring in his/her environment (Daniel, Wassell & Gilligan, 1999: 31). During the preschool years, it is parents who exert the most 'influence' upon the child in the parent-child microsystem. The richness of this microsystem is determined by the quality of nurturance, attachment and interactions that occur, which in turn creates developmental opportunity or risk for the developing child (Hutchins et al., 1999; Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992).

Parenting styles considered

In Australia, many different parenting styles are acknowledged however, like Bronfenbrenner, this study used Baumrind's (1979) work on child rearing styles (authoritarian, authoritative and permissive) to explore the effect of the different styles on parent- child communication. In particular the use of the phrase *how many times have I told you?* Within each parenting style, the expectations of parents differ as some parents have high expectations, whilst others have little or none. Baumrind's (1979) identification of two aspects of parental behaviour, responsiveness (nurturance) and demandingness (expectations), the level of which determines developmental opportunity or developmental risk for the child (Daniel et al. 1999; Marion, 1999; Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992) was an important benchmark for the study. This was supported by Woodrow (1999) and Bornstein (n.d) who report that how mothers and fathers perceive their parenting role and the 'child', influences the quality of interactions and the way they communicate with their child. As the study utilised the strategy of storyboards to provide parents with scenarios that aligned with the different styles of parenting, it is relevant at this point to provide a brief overview of each of these styles of parenting.

The Authoritarian parenting style has a high level of demandingness but a low level of responsiveness, and is generally associated with poorer developmental outcomes for the child (Daniel et al. 1999; Marion, 1999; Bornstein, n.d). The authoritarian parent values tradition and order, thus viewing obedience and conformity as virtues. When the child's actions conflict with the parent's ideas of proper conduct, the child is punished in whatever way the parent sees fit (Barakat & Clark, 1999). These parents set "too many arbitrary" limits and demand that the child unquestioningly accept their decisions (Marion, 1999:63). As verbal give and take is discouraged, the child's opinion is not considered. The responsiveness is low as the approach is parent-centred with the needs of the parent, and not the child, being foremost. This can be seen in the problem-solving process whereby authoritarian parents fulfil their needs by responding to the child's actions and statements with orders, admonitions, and/or criticism. However, the child's problem remains unsolved (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993:159). This creates a 'win-lose' situation, where the parent always wins, as the focus is on maintaining parental power (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993:157). Whilst, the balance of power rests with the parent and the child is placed in a passive role (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992), "authoritarian parents assign the child the same responsibilities as adults" (Scarr, Weinberg & Levine, 1986:306). This form of rigid, one-sided control hinders the development of the child's full potential, affecting the child's ability to make his or her own decisions (Barakat & Clark, 1999; Birch 1999). The authoritarian parent fails to meet the child's psychological needs, thus posing developmental risk to the child due to a socially impoverished parent-child microsystem that lacks reciprocity (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). Autonomy is not encouraged and individual development is unsupported (Daniel et al., 1999). As a consequence, the child may feel frustrated, resentful and angry, and become discouraged, dependent and less self-assured. Ultimately, this negative emotional climate can adversely affect the child's self-esteem and developing self-concept (Barakat & Clark, 1999; Marion 1995).

In somewhat contrast, the Authoritative parenting style is associated with a high level of both demandingness and responsiveness, and is viewed as providing the optimal emotional climate for the child's growth and development (Daniel et al., 1999). Authoritative parents set limits and standards for

behaviour that is developmentally appropriate. Expectations for desired behaviour are clearly communicated, and whilst the authoritative parent is warm and nurturing, they are also firm, consistent and fair (Barakat & Clark, 1999). They use power to achieve the control seen as necessary in guiding and monitoring the child's activities and behaviour (Marion, 1999). However, the control of the child is maintained with rational, issue-oriented strategies as the aim of the authoritative parent is to promote the child's autonomy whilst also ensuring conformity to group standards (Marion, 1995). As part of their communicative strategies, parents use reasoning, negotiation and suggestions that rely on persuasion, and not force, to gain a child's cooperation (Marion, 1999). The child is given choices and encouraged to make decisions and taught responsibility by having to accept the natural and logical consequences of their choices/decisions thus empowering the child (Barakat & Clark, 1999; Porter, 1997; Balson, 1994; Miller, 1990). As verbal give and take is accepted and the child's opinion is respected and valued, it enables a 'win-win' situation in the parent-child problem-solving process (Marion, 1999; Gonzalez-Mena, 1993; Gordon, 1970). Overall, the parent-child relationship is mutually accommodating and based on reciprocity. This healthy parent-child microsystem produces a positive emotional climate as the quality of interactions and nurturance is high and expectations realistic, creating developmental opportunity for the child (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). As this style of parenting provides a balance between control and independence it is likely to produce a child who is competent, socially responsible, self-assured, and independent (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993). It is in this positive emotional climate that the child can develop high self-esteem and a positive self-concept.

Whilst there are various permissive parenting styles, the study focussed on the 'indifferent' parent who is low in demandingness and responsiveness (Daniel et al. 1999; Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). In daily life the 'indifferent' parent does not provide structure and does not consider the child's needs and interests (Daniel et al. 1999: 45). The parent can be socially and emotionally removed from the child, often ignoring the child. As the child's opinion is not sought, and verbal give and take is not encouraged, "shutting off the developmentally enhancing process of negotiation" (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992:41). This parent avoids outright physical control, so leaving the child to regulate his or her own activities and behaviour. The child is not pushed to obey any guidelines or standards and even when limits are established, these are not enforced (Barakat & Clark, 1999). Unlike the authoritarian parent, this permissive parent is passive and grants all power to the child so in a 'win-lose' situation the child wins (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993; Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). However, the child remains dissatisfied as it is "uncomfortable to be out of control", so the child places "a lot of energy into controlling their parent and trying to get their parent to control them" (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993:157). This parent-child microsystem fails the child due to lack of nurturance and reciprocity, as the indifferent parent "starves the child of emotional sustenance" (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992:43). Like the authoritarian parenting style, this permissive style creates a negative emotional climate where the child's psychological needs are not met, making the child "vulnerable to being easily discouraged by everyday problems and turns the child away from full and satisfying participation in the world" (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992:42). Thus, posing developmental risk to the child by hindering the development of social competence, high self-esteem and a positive self-concept (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). The possible outcomes for the child are inability to handle frustration, difficulty in accepting responsibility, social / emotional immaturity, dependency, and lack of self-control and self-reliance (Barakat & Clark, 1999; Gonzalez-Mena, 1993).

Thus, according to Smith (1998:1), effective parenting, no matter what parenting style is adopted, "must be the first priority; and effective parenting is built on communication...and that...planned, ongoing communication is the crucial missing link in many families". In Landry's (n.d.:1-2) research on the importance of parent-child interactions, high quality parent-child interactions produced children with the highest rate of cognitive development by four-and-a-half years of age. Furthermore, it was concluded that, "negative parenting, that is constant negative and restrictive verbalizations, was shown to have a negative impact on social development and competence" (Landry, n.d.:1-2). The concern for everyone is

what happens to children who have a less than optimum early childhood (Mustard & McCain, 1999:55). As parents are the major influence in the child's life, optimum development in early childhood is thus largely dependent on the parent's knowledge of how children think and learn. Following an ecological approach this level of knowledge can be influenced by the information parents receive from a varying array of societal and family inputs.

However, effective communication is a two-way social interaction so it is not just important to understand the impact of parent's understanding of child development but also the mechanisms the child uses in understanding what the parent is communicating to them.

Child's construction of knowledge

In order to understand how children learns a Vygotskian perspective of cognitive development has been adopted, utilizing his concepts of 'guidance', 'social dialogues', and 'internalisation'. Vygotsky stressed the importance of language to the development of higher intellectual processes (Meadows, 1993). Vygotsky, like Bronfenbrenner, emphasised the importance of a positive and nurturing environment where the child is an 'active' partner in the process of social interaction with others in the socio-cultural context (Banham, 1994; Meadows, 1993). Through social interaction, the child learns to guide and direct his/her own learning and behaviour using private speech. Eventually, this private speech is internalised to become silent inner speech and thought. 'Internalisation' is the integral component in the building of consciousness, whereby the child acquires cognitive consciousness, self-consciousness and self-concept through social interaction (Meadows, 1993:241). This process of internalisation incorporates experimentation and exploration.

"Central to experimentation is making 'constructive errors' that are necessary to mental development (NAEYC & NAECSSDE, 1991:25). These 'constructive errors' reflect the child's present interpretation and understanding of an experience that will gradually be revised, modified and changed as the child develops and learns (Berk, 1996; NAEYC & NAECSSDE, 1991). In the context of this study, Jamie (a 5-year-old) wrote his/her name as 'Jame' which, according to the developmental literature was developmentally appropriate (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000; IRA/NAEYC, 1998; Smith et al., 1998; Berk, 1996; Barron 1990; Temple, Nathan, Burris & Temple, 1988). At this level (kindergarten to early primary) of literacy development the child is forming basic concepts of print and starts to experiment with reading and writing. The child spells phonetically as part of experimenting with letters and sounds, and "begins to write letters of the alphabet and some high frequency words" such as his or her name (IRA/NAEYC, 1998:40: Smith et al. 1998; Berk, 1996). Thus, parent's "goals and expectations for young children's achievement in reading and writing should be developmentally appropriate…and with sufficient adult support" (IRA/NAEYC, 1998:38). This means that parents need to firstly understand and accept that children at this level do not use conventional forms of spelling. Secondly, that they can best encourage the young child's attempts by providing meaningful, literacy-rich experiences in the context of everyday routines, activities, and play where the child is free to experiment with letters and sounds without the constraint of parental expectations for correct spelling (IRA/NAEYC, 1998:34; Berk, 1996; Barron, 1990). He emphasised that the collaborative process in adult-child interactions needs to be positive and nurturing in order to promote cognitive development (Banham, 1994). Thus, following the Vygotsky approach discussed earlier, the parent's role is one of "supporting, guiding and facilitating development and learning, as opposed to the traditional view of 'teaching' as transmission of knowledge (NAEYC/NAECSSDE, 1991:26). Vygotsky stressed that the parent must carefully and sensitively match the guidance or 'scaffolding' to the child's present level of understanding and development, whilst providing appropriate challenge in order to move the child cognitively forward to independent mastery of the skill and internalisation of knowledge (Banham, 1994; Meadows, 1993; Meadows & Cashdan, 1988).

Integrating these two major understandings, how parents communicate and understand their child, and

how the child internalises the communications from the parent provides a platform upon which the process of two-way social interaction was examined.

Actions or words or both?

Is the way that something is said really more important than the actual words used?

This examination of communicative interactions between parent and child was useful as it is through parent-child interactions that parents communicate their expectations and attitudes to their child using verbal and non-verbal language to convey meaning within different situations and settings (Bigner, 1994;Gonzalez-Mena, 1993). There are many common, empty expressions or ineffectual words used by adults when communicating with children. How often has the comment or question such as "you're driving me crazy" or "what did I just say?" been asked. (Donovan & McIntyre, 1999:1-3).

From an ecological perspective, when looking at issues involving the young child, it is crucial to consider the parent-child microsystem. Bronfenbrenner believed that the child's experiences in this system "colour his or her whole view of the world" and that the 'affective tone' or emotional climate is the main issue to be considered (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992:42). A positive climate is expressed as one of nurturance, responsiveness and reciprocity where the child can develop a positive self-concept. This climate creates a type of 'social momentum' in the child, promoting the child's confidence and competence (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992:42) A negative climate creates a form of "social deadweight" whereby the child becomes discouraged (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992:42). This negative climate encompasses all microsystem behaviours including "what is said (or not said), what is done (or not done)" (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992:42).

Other studies also support the premise that both words and actions have an impact on the child and his/her developing self-concept. Bigner (1994: 65) claimed that both direct and indirect verbal remarks impacted on the child emotionally and that parents often were "totally oblivious to the long-term effects...on the child's developing self-image". Albrecht (1992:9) suggested that "what we say and how we say it can have a profound effect on children as they grow".

However, other studies claim that the way a person communicates has the greater impact. Mehrabian (1968) in his research on communication concluded that 7% of the impact was verbal and that the remaining 93% were non-verbal. Parker & Stimpson (1999:74) stated likewise, arguing that only 7% of what is expressed are communicated through words and that the remainder of the message is conveyed through body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. Goleman (1996:97) argued that "90% or more of a message is non-verbal". Furthermore, Jalongo (1996:21) claimed that "children learn more from our actions than our words". Hattie (1992:49) concurred, stating that "there is much evidence that when discrepant verbal and nonverbal messages are conveyed, it is the nonverbal messages that can be expected to convey the most accurate message.

However, does the way or the words used during the communication, whether positive or negative, affect the child's developing self-concept?

The developing self concept

Why is it so critical to consider the child's developing self-concept? Why is the development of a healthy self-concept important? Demoulin (1999:2) defined self-concept as:

> *the sum total of all experiences we are exposed to over time and the negative or positive weights we assign to those experiences — it is, in a small sense, a personal composite of ourselves...and*

> *...consists of two major sub-components: self-efficacy which is our sensitivity toward some task and based on motivation, confidence, and ability to control stress associated with that task; and self-esteem which is a perception of self and the weight that is placed on the perception of significant others.*

The importance of positive early childhood experiences, is emphasised, as it is between the ages of two and six that a child begins to form and develop self-concept (Demoulin 1999:4). Furthermore, research indicated that approximately eighty-percent of a child's self-concept is developed by the age of five (Purdue News, 1997).

The child's self-concept develops as a result of social interactions discussed earlier. The development of self-acceptance and self-esteem depends upon the quality and nature of the various interactions that occur. Essential to social interaction are the issues of "empathy, trust, nurturance, and expectations" (Hattie, 1992:126). In early childhood, the child's developing self-concept is largely influenced by "parental evaluations, interests, and expectations" (Hattie, 1992:189). Thus, parents play a critical role in promoting a healthy self-concept. One way to promote its development is to give positive feedback to the child (Marion, 1999; Barnes, 1998; Myers-Walls, Hinkley & Reid, n.d). "Feedback is probably among the most powerful modifiers of one's self-concept" (Hattie, 1992:251). According to Marion (1999: 171) by giving meaningful feedback that focuses on the things that a child has done well helps the child to recognise his or her own competence. As a child's view of him/herself develops in a social context, it is through positive feedback that the child develops a realistic view that competence is earned and with it comes confidence and motivation (Marion, 1999:165-167). The child requires a warm and friendly environment with supportive adults who adopt an authoritative parenting style. "Authoritative adults have a clear communication style. They deliver messages simply, kindly, firmly and consistently" (Marion 1999:51). This approach has been closely linked to children displaying qualities such as "higher levels of compliance...helpfulness, and cooperation, and to lower levels of aggression" (Marion 1999:170).

Negative feedback — what effect?

Constant negative feedback is detrimental to the child's social, emotional and cognitive development (Porter, 1997). Research has revealed that the "early years from conception to age six have the most important influence of any time in the life cycle on brain development and subsequent learning, behaviour and health" (Mustard & McCain, 1999: 52). Furthermore, research has discovered that the young child's environment is more influential on brain development, than previously suspected. Mustard & McCain (1999:39) argued that the "environment affects not only the number of brain cells and number of connections among them, but also the way these connections are 'wired'", which lasts a lifetime. In the first six years of a child's life "there are critical periods during which the brain is particularly efficient at creating neural pathways" (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000:7: Mustard & McCain, 1999:5). Neural connections are formed as the young child actively explores his/her environment, and develops attachment relationships with family members. Thus, a positive and nurturing environment is crucial to healthy neurological development in the child. The underdevelopment and/or destruction of neural pathways can occur when the child's environment and experiences are lacking, negative or stressful (Milne 1999:11). Eventually the "architecture of the brain reflects the presence or absence of a wide range of physical, cognitive, and emotional experiences during early childhood" (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000:7; Mustard & McCain, 1999:6).

In the context of this study, the negative feedback given through the use of this phrase, *how many times have I told you?* can erect "roadblocks" in the child's mind, as the message sent is one of judgement, blame and criticism for failing to meet expectations (Porter, 1997:28-29). If used often enough the child eventually becomes "parent deaf", as the child perceives the parent as lecturing, scolding, threatening or

moralising (Birch, 1999: 41; Balson, 1994:163). The child who has been exposed to ongoing negative feedback withdraws and stops communicating with the parent (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1995:253).

In light of the above, the parent's use of negative labels and put-downs when interacting with a child presents developmental risk, becoming 'seeds' planted in the child's mind which then grows into a negative self-concept (Biddulph, 1993). This raises important questions.

Parental communication and expectation

Patterns of interactions among family members become a model for the child as he/she learns about ways of communicating in personal relationships. The child learns about authority, feelings, closeness and distance between parent and child (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993:80). Bolton (1986) encapsulated the ecological perspective of the importance of reciprocity, nurturance and affective tone in all relationships. Smith (1998:1) supported this view and stated that "planned, ongoing communication is the crucial missing link in many families". Sound parent-child relationships are based on effective communication that is friendly and respectful in manner (Smith, 1998: Balson, 1994). Bredekamp (1996:10) stated that in early childhood, the adult facilitates communication with the child by "sitting low or kneeling, and making eye contact". Furthermore, she emphasised the importance of "positive responses such as smiles and interest, and concentrated attention" on the child's activity (Bredekamp, 1996:9). Balson (1994:165) claimed that "effective communication between parents and children is a two-way process involving listening and expressing". To listen effectively the parent needs to give the child their undivided attention, notice the child's feelings and the words used, and actively reflect on what is being conveyed (Porter, 1997:26). However, studies have revealed that adults listen effectively; that is, they listen attentively and actively process what is heard, for only twenty-five percent of the listening time (Jalongo, 1996:21-26). The same studies revealed that adults have much higher expectations for children's listening and paying attention in that even "young children are expected to listen to adults nearly half of the time" whether at home or in the early childhood setting (Jalongo, 1996:21).

In this exploratory pilot study we targeted one common phrase *how many times have I told you* - as it has been said "thousand of times by thousands of parents in a tone of complete exasperation" (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1995:138; Balson, 1994: 105). The aim of this study was to begin to explore whether mothers and fathers believe that the way they communicate the phrase, *how many times have I told you,* to their young child (ages 4 to five years of age) has any effect on the child's developing self-concept.

METHODOLOGY

The research question was divided into three components being:

1. The parental perception of the intent of the phrase *how many times have I told you*
2. The parental perception of the effect of the phrase *how many times have I told you* on the child's developing self-concept. The effect ascertained through both the verbal (the words used) and non-verbal (body language) communication of the phrase and the context in which it occurred.
3. The level of parental understanding of the term self-concept and of when a child develops most of his/her self-concept.

This exploratory pilot study targeted eighteen families with one parent interviewed from each family. The participants were selected as per the following selection criteria:

- The participants of this research were nine mothers and nine fathers, one participant per family, each with a child aged four to five years old of either gender.

- The nine mothers and nine fathers were sourced from local child-care centres, pre-primary units and playgroups.

- The same number of mothers and fathers were selected to ensure equal representation of both genders.

The age of the child was selected at four or five years of age as the literature indicates that between the ages of two and six a child begins to form and develop self-concept and more than 85% is formed by age 5 (Demoulin, 1994; Purdue New, 1997).

As this study was exploratory to ascertain trends in parent beliefs and the research has documented that the phrase *how many times have I told you* is used widely, it did not differentiate on the following aspects when selecting its pilot sample: socio/economic status, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, parental age, difference in parenting experience, number of children in the home and the birth order of the target child.

The eighteen parents were divided into three groups of six. Three researchers each interviewed three mothers and three fathers who were coded numerically from 1 to 18, with gender identified as M (male), F (female).

Three storyboards, utilizing the three main parenting styles — authoritarian (Storyboard A), authoritative (Storyboard B) and permissive (Storyboard C) were developed to present to the pilot group of parents. The storyboards (see Appendix 1) told the same story, from the three different perspectives, of a four year old child interacting with a parent undertaking the task of writing their name. The parents were read each storyboard independently followed by a set of eight specific, open-ended questions (see Appendix 2) directly related to the storyboard after each storyboard. All questions were the same for each storyboard and the researcher recorded the parents' responses.

The data was collated as follows:

Parents (1 to 18) responses were collated question by question. Questions 1, 2 and 3 were grouped as section one, as these questions and the responses related directly to Storyboards A, B, and C. The collective results were summarized according to the similarities and differences of the responses given in order to identify the occurrence of any trends or patterns. Question 3 was triangulated to questions 1 and 2 via qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data obtained and literature review.

Questions 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 were grouped as section two and divided into two subsections:

Questions 4, 5 and 6 related to the parents' personal understanding of intent, verbal, non-verbal and contextual communication of the phrase *how many times have I told you*, and its effect on the child's developing self-concept. The responses to questions 4, 5 and 6 were cross-checked to participant's responses to questions 1, 2 and 3 in order to identify overall consistencies / inconsistencies between responses in both sections.

Questions 7 and 8 related to the parents' personal knowledge of the term 'self-concept' and the age at which it is mostly developed. The aim was to identify the level of parent understanding and the subsequent implications for parent education and programs. The responses to questions 1 to 8 are presented in the forms of narrative description. The findings are in the narrative format.

DISCUSSION

Whilst this exploratory pilot study provided information about parent's perception of parent-child communication, it has raised more questions and implications due to the contradictions, inconsistencies and confusion in the participants' responses. The overall findings of the study suggested that participants believed that the way the phrase, how many times have I told you was delivered had more impact than what was said, which seemingly supported the common belief that 'actions speak louder than words'. Phrases like; 'it's not what you say, it's how you say it' and 'actions tend to be more dominant in giving that negative effect' were commonly recorded.

Overall Trends

Specific Understanding of the phrase

The data emerging from the participant's specific understanding of the intent, manner and effect of the phrase in the context of the three storyboards, demonstrated strong patterns in which the parents predominantly understood the negative intent of the phrase in that it was blaming or demeaning the child. There was general agreement that it was not okay to say the phrase because of its negative effect, in that it was 'discouraging, critical and gave negative feedback to the child'. The effect on the child's feelings were also viewed as negative and described in terms of the child feeling 'inferior', 'unsure of self', 'hurt' and 'discouraged'. The parents were most definite in their overall responses to the storyboards, showing a high level of understanding of the negative use of the phrase and its negative effect on the young child. For example, parent 1 stated that it was not okay to say the phrase *how many times have I told you*, at all as 'it is discouraging to the child and could be stated in a different way that would be less discouraging'.

General Understanding of the Phrase

However, data that related to the parents' general understanding and personal opinion of the phrase *how many times have I told you* and its intent, manner, context and effect, identified many contradictions. The parents were not as definite or consistent as when they were asked to explain their understanding of the phrase. It appears that when it came to the parents' personal opinion they justified using the phrase by specifying conditions for its use. That is, it was okay to say the phrase as long as it was done in a 'friendly, nice and reassuring way' so the child would then feel 'encouraged, loved, accepted and good about self'. It was not okay to use the phrase if accompanied by negative behaviour and body language as in 'facial expressions'; 'anger' — shouting or yelling at child; and 'ignoring' the child, as these actions deliver a negative message making the child feel 'hurt', 'sad', 'alone', 'isolated', and 'a failure'. Thus, parents equated positive parental behaviour and body language with having a positive effect on the child, whilst negative parental behaviour and body language was equated with negative effect. Most interestingly, it became clear that generally the parents were confused, inconsistent and contradictory in their responses, in that at times the phrase was deemed as positive when accompanied by positive behaviour and body language. For example, parent 7 responded to question 5 by stating:

> *The same words can be said in a rough way or a nice way. If presented in a mean way the child will feel bad, but in a nice way the child will feel okay about himself because he will know he is loved - he won't hear the words.*

In addition, parent 9 commented:.

> *You can say some nasty things smiling but it is still nasty, or you can say nice things yelling but it is still nasty.*

The inconsistency and contradiction that prevailed throughout this Section of the study was highlighted by parent 1 response to whether it was the way or the words that may affect a child's feelings about

him/herself (question 5):

> *The words used, and the way you say it, delivers a set of feelings and a message to the child. 'How many times have I told you' is such a common statement - used automatically and habitually. You could use the statement in an encouraging way as long as accompanied by a positive and encouraging manner. Can use it to 'reinforce' a good habit — doing it in a form of discipline, training or teaching - packing toys away; toilet training.*

Furthermore, the same parent when responding to whether it was okay to say the phrase in private but not in public (question 6) stated:

> *It depends on the situation or context you use it in — if you do use it either in private or in front of others, do it in an encouraging rather than discouraging way. I relate to the statement as in disgust, anger and frustration and wouldn't use it in front of others - more likely to use it in private. Could use that statement as a 'put-down', to make someone look as if not good at something. Using the 'wrong way'- to put people down in front of others, showing up their mistakes — is wrong.*

Actions or words?

As the data appears to indicate that the parents do believe that actions speak louder than words, does this then mean that negative words, when accompanied with 'positive' behaviour, have little or no effect on the child and the developing self-concept? Does this belief pose developmental opportunity or risk to the child?

According to the responses, the majority of parents perceived the way as more powerful, in that the body language and behaviour displayed when delivering the phrase 'how many times have I told you?' determined positive or negative effect on the child's feelings and self-concept. Parents justified their positions in various ways. Parent 2 stated:

> *Body language and behaviour is subliminal, so it has a deeper impact. Words can be misconstrued, confused, not understood but 'actions, no mistaking it'. There is more consistency with behaviour than with words — long term behaviour has the deeper impact.*

Likewise, parent 4 stated 'body language is very important and can read much from this — for both adults and children. It's not what you say but how you say it'. Parent 10 suggested ' the words are not important. It's the tone and manner it's said. The child will not remember the words but will the anger or disinterest'.

Interestingly, although the way was considered as more powerful than the words, the majority of parents believed that the phrase *how many times have I told you,* was negative in intent and that it had a negative effect on the child's feelings. The consensus was that the phrase was 'critical' and gave 'negative feedback' which was 'discouraging' to the child.

Overall, the responses given by the parents in this exploratory pilot study tend to support the consensus in the research that "body language is a very important medium of communication" (Bolton, 1986:78).

Different settings, different expectations

In question 6, the study set out to identify if there were any differences in parents' perceptions in the use of the phrase *how many times have I told you* within the private and public contexts. From an ecological

viewpoint, the context in which interactions occur is just as important as what is said and not said, done and not done in the parent-child microsystem. Due to the complexity of the parent-child relationship and the communicative interactions that occur, other contexts as in the mesosystem (home-preschool, local neighbourhood) must be considered (Hutchins & Sims, 1999; Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). Bigner (1992:42) asserted that contextual communication refers to "where and under what circumstances the verbal and non-verbal communications occur".

Supporting the consistent patterns of belief noted earlier, 56% of parents stated that it was okay to say the phrase *how many times have I told you* either in private or in private and public. Varieties of justifications were provided. For example, parent 12 commented:

> *Yes, it's okay but in private only and in a joking way. The child would be embarrassed in front of people — their value is not high — they would lose face in front of others. In private, no one else can listen.*

Similarly, parent 11 stated:

> *In private it is one-to-one — no one else has any idea of what is going on, so it's okay as long as it is done in a respectful manner. You don't to embarrass the child in front of others or peers.*

Parents in favour of using the phrase in both private and public justified their positions in the following ways. Parent 2 stated:

> *If you use it in private then you use it in public as well — all to do with honesty of self. If you only use it in private, children grow up thinking there are hidden things that are only done at home. So children learn not to be honest and learn to be secretive about private behaviours like child abuse where children don't talk about this outside the home. This creates two worlds for the child.*

Furthermore, parent 14 suggested:

> *If you are going to use it (the phrase), you can use it whether in private or public. Depends on whether you are a hypocrite — if you use it in one place and not the other.*

In contrast, when the parents were asked if they thought it was okay for a parent to say the phrase to a child (Question 2), 80% of the parents, across all three parenting styles, stated that it was not okay to say the phrase. Thus, it appears that when the question was referring to other parents using the phrase, it was not okay but when the question focussed on them, it appeared to be okay in different contexts. This was an example of the overall confusion and inconsistencies of responses regarding not only the words and the way, but also the context in which the phrase *how many times have I told you* is used.

This confusion is somewhat supported by the diversity in the literature as to whether the way or both the way and the words has the greater impact on the child's feelings and developing self-concept. This diversity was similarly reflected in the parents' responses. Why do parents communicate and respond in the ways that they do? Is it the way or is it both the way and the words' that effects the child's development, as "parents directly influence child development both by the beliefs they hold and by the behaviours they exhibit" (Bornstein, n.d.:4). Is this saying that the parenting style of the parents can pose either developmental opportunity or developmental risk to the child? (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992).

Across the parenting styles

Authoritarian

The majority of the responses given by the parents demonstrated that they viewed the way that the phrase was was negative and had a negative effect on the child's feelings. For example, (in response to question 1) parent 2 stated that it was a 'negative statement, negatively phrased and conveys disappointment and disapproval'. Parent 5 stated that there were 'too many high expectations of the parent because the child may take 5 or 6 times to spell their name right'; and in question 2 reiterated that 'the phrase was negative and too aggressive'. When asked if they thought the way in which the message was delivered could affect the child's feeling about themselves (question 3), 100 % of the parents regarded the way as having a negative effect. They used words such as 'discouraged', 'inferior', 'hurt' and 'unsure' to describe the child's feelings. Parent 3 commented that 'it's a put-down and the child would feel bad about self as he has not lived up to the parent's expectations, or done what they should have done'. Parent 9 suggested that 'the child is trying to impress his parent and will feel crushed as the parent was nasty and it will hurt the child, making him feel downhearted'. Similarly, parent 10 said that 'it will affect him badly as it is negatively telling the child he is useless. It will make him feel unloved and unsure of himself'.

Overall, the parents recognised the high expectations of the parent in this story, as they clearly identified the parent's frustration, anger and disappointment that child was not able to learn from his/her mistakes. The focus was upon the mistake made, with blame placed upon the child for not paying attention or listening to the instructions given. This gave rise to some interesting questions. Are children being viewed as 'miniature adults' capable of performing to adult expectations? Is the child deliberately being 'disobedient'? Is the child being set up for failure because of unrealistic expectations due to the parent's lack of knowledge of child development? Is this a macrosystem issue where society's high expectations for 'success' and 'achievement' are filtering down to the child?

Authoritative

When reviewing this parenting approach, 83% of the parents stated that the phrase as negative, and blamed the child for still repeating the same mistakes and not listening or paying attention. However, they also commented that the parent in the storyboard was more 'encouraging', 'reassuring', 'supportive' and 'constructive' as specific direction was given to the child in that the parent was 'helping', 'showing' or 'teaching' the child. Parent 6 acknowledged that it was a 'nicer, warmer, softer, friendlier way'. Likewise, parent 11 suggested:

> *Though still said in frustration and irritation that the child has forgotten the 'i' in his name, it was meant in a positive manner. It was more supportive — not negative but positive.*

In questions 2 (is it okay to use the phrase) the parent responses were divided, with 50% stating that it was not okay to use the phrase citing the same reasons ('discouraging', 'critical' and demeaning) as in authoritarian storyboard. The remaining 50% stated that it was okay to say the phrase in this instance as the parent's behaviour was more 'friendly' and 'encouraging'. For example, parent 11 stated:

> *Yes, in this story the parent was friendly and because it was positive — it was backed up by what he did — turned off the television and helped the child in a loving way.*

Again, in question 3 (could the way the phase is said affect a child's self concept), there was a divided response, with 50% of parents stating the way had a negative effect, and 50% as having a positive effect on the child's feelings. Parent 11 commented:

> *The emphasis is not on the words. The way it is said here makes it all right — the words do not matter because the child will remember the smile and the support of the parent.*

Parent 7 asserted that 'as it is in a more friendly way, he will feel okay. The child will feel okay because he knows his parent is interested in him'.

Permissive

In storyboard C, 89% of parents blamed the parent, criticising the parent in the story for being 'uncaring' and 'not interested' in the child, the child's work, or the child's progress. For example, parent 2 suggested that 'there's no pressure on the child to perform and no set expectations. The parent is not caring and is more apathetic'. However, 28% of parents also perceived that the child was at fault as the child was not paying attention and had failed to learn. Parent 4 stated that the parent is 'disappointed that the child has not picked their name correctly, so is conveying an indifferent attitude and does not really care what the child is doing'. This response highlighted the underlying parental expectations on the child's ability to perform and the rejection when the child did not meet expectations. As in storyboard A (authoritative), 94% of participants stated that it is not okay to say the phrase *how many times have I told you* to the child as it was negative and had a negative effect on the child's feelings. Parent 9 stated that ' it's not okay to say (the phrase) as it's telling the kid he is allowed to do what he likes because the parent is not interested and doesn't care'. Whereas, parent 7 said that 'the child will feel discouraged and will eventually not care as well, if this is repeated often. If the parent doesn't care, the child is not going to care as well'. Whilst the parents' descriptions of negative effect on the child's feelings were similar to storyboard A (authoritarian), they also identified the child's rejection by the parent, using words like 'worthless' 'lonely' and 'isolated' to describe the child's feelings. Parent 12 concluded:

> *The child feels lonely because he has the right to get the parent's attention. So when he gets older, he will still be lonely and can go out on the streets, join gangs, get corrupted, or go to nightclubs.*

Interestingly, some parents viewed the negative effect of storyboard C (permissive) as worse than storyboard A (authoritative). For example, parent 2 commented:

> *The child will feel worthless, unimportant, and insignificant — just like a nothing. This story is worse than the first one (story A) which was very negative and damaging to the child's self-esteem and how they feel about themselves. In this story (C) the child feels as if he has no impact on his parents whatsoever. From the child's viewpoint it is better to have parents yell, than not to be recognised at all. All children would rather some response than nothing, even if it's negative.*

Collectively, questions that asked the parents what they felt was being said to the child in the storyboards, demonstrated that although not definite in their responses, they appeared to understand that the authoritative parent had high expectations as the focus was still on correcting the mistake the child had made. Whilst, they identified the authoritative parent was still blaming the child, the parents viewed the behaviour as more 'encouraging' and 'friendly', making the phrase more positive. Confusion, inconsistencies and contradictions were again evident as the parents were equally divided when considering questions 2 and 3. 50% of parents stated that it was not okay to say the phrase as it had a negative effect, the other 50% said that it was okay to use as it had a positive effect. In this case, does it mean that positive behaviour or body language neutralises or even negates the negative words spoken? Again, do actions speak louder than words? Why is the focus on the mistake and not the process the child went through to write the name?

However, whilst, 89% of parents viewed storyboard A (authoritative) and 83% viewed storyboard B (authoritarian) as blaming the child, there was a shift in storyboard C (permissive) where 89% of parents blamed the parent. It was noted that whilst in storyboard C (permissive) only 28% blamed the child, collectively (across storyboards A, B & C) 67% of participants perceived that the blame was on the child.

Mistake centered focus

Collective analysis of the data, highlighted a 'mistake-centred' focus, as the parents identified the parent in the storyboards as expressing disappointment and frustration at still having to repeat the instructions. This was because they perceived the child was not listening or paying attention in the past, and thus was still making the same mistake. One area of concern that poses developmental risk to the child is the parents' focus upon the child's spelling mistake and the perception that the mistake needed to be corrected. Why did the parents focus on correcting the mistake? Did this mistake really need to be corrected in the first place? Was this developmentally appropriate? Were their expectations realistic? Did the parents display an understanding of the learning process and literacy development in the young child? There appeared to be a discrepancy between what parents' perceptions of the child's capabilities and the child's actual stage of learning and literacy development. These questions are not clearly identified even in the literature.

Review of parenting literature identifies that there is some confusion as to whether the child's mistakes needed to be corrected or not (Porter, 1997; Dreikurs & Soltz, 1995; Balson, 1994; Stenhouse, 1994). Porter (1997:38-39) and Balson (1994:79-80) claimed that in childhood, mistakes are a natural and necessary part of learning and that "most mistakes do not have to be corrected" and should be ignored as the mistakes reveal the young child's inexperience or lack of skill at a particular time. The consensus was that children learn best in an environment of support and encouragement, where the focus is 'child-centred', with the emphasis is upon 'strengths' not 'weaknesses'; and 'process' rather than 'product' (Porter, 1997; Dreikurs & Soltz, 1995; Balson, 1994). Alternatively, Stenhouse (1994:110) suggested that part of parent's responsibilities in teaching and guiding the child, is to "point out mistakes, better ways of doing things, and, quite often, to make it clear that certain behaviours are unacceptable". However, he emphasised that the way in which this was done needed to be encouraging (Stenhouse, 1994). Marion (1999:62) also stated that parents influence childrens' learning and behaviour through "direct instruction, or coaching...which...involves intentional and explicit teaching" that must be done in a positive way. Thus, their stance seemingly concurred with the parents' beliefs in that mistakes can be pointed out as long as it is done in a positive and encouraging way.

We recognise that there is consensus that children must acquire the skills and competencies necessary to meet the challenges of technological change and globalisation. At the macro level, tremendous pressure is placed on parents by society, to ensure that their children are educated and are academically successful from a very early age. As education and academic success are highly valued in Australian society, parents feel responsible for ensuring that their child acquire competencies and skills such as reading and writing so that, as adults, they can function effectively in society (Bigner, 1994; Bornstein, n.d.). Research revealed that "parents of young children appear to be more concerned than teachers about teaching children to count, read and write and to be less concerned about promoting independence or a positive self-concept" (Dunn & Kontos, 1997:8). In this study, the parents' focus on correcting the child's spelling mistake reflected this.

Many homes are 'mistake-centred' and parents respond to their child's skill or behavioural deficits by adopting this approach, in the mistaken belief that they must teach the child "the correct way of performing or accomplishing the task", so as to avoid making the same mistakes in the future (Balson, 1994:69). Generally, the parents' believed that it was all right and necessary to point out the child's mistakes as the child needed to learn the 'right' way. The parental emphasis upon mistakes poses a serious threat to the child's development as the parent's attitude conveys the message that it is unacceptable to make mistakes and that there is no room for failure (Porter, 1997; Balson, 1994). Additionally, this attitude conveys to the child that he or she is incapable of performing successfully without parental input or direction (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1995; Balson, 1994). This approach results in the

child doubting his or her own abilities and feeling "inferior" or "discouraged" whenever he/she fails to perform to the parent's expectations (Balson, 1994:70). "Young children distinguish how well others like them (social acceptance) from how 'good' they are at doing things (competence)...and before age seven, they do not discriminate competence at different activities" (Berk, 1996: 357). As a result, even a little disapproval can undermine and erode confidence and self-esteem which is displayed in the child's attitude and behaviour such as; increased anxiety and stress; and task avoidance due to fear of failure (Berk, 1996). Constant fault-finding or criticism can create a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' for the child, who eventually gives up and starts to "live up to" the parent's negative views (Berk, 1996:452; Dreikurs & Soltz, 1995; Balson, 1994). The negative messages the child receives from the parent is the main contributing factor to "'learned helplessness" that can be generalised to other areas of learning (Berk, 1996:471). The child who displays learned helplessness tends to have parents who have high expectations or standards, but who also view their child as incompetent and as needing to work harder in order to succeed (Berk, 1996:472). The parents in the study clearly identified these issues in their responses, describing the child as feeling 'discouraged', 'inferior', a 'failure'; and that the child would 'give up' or 'not try' any more.

Children's understanding of the interaction

In this study, the parents generally viewed the parent as teacher and the child as learner. This was evident in the responses given, with parents using words such as 'teaching', 'instructing', 'telling', 'showing' and 'correcting' to describe the parent as teacher. The child was described in terms of needing to 'listen', 'pay attention', and 'learn' — 'it's a learning curve'. Bigner (1994:53) asserted that "the relationship between parents and children focuses in many respects on the configuration of the adult as teacher and the child as learner". This results in an unequal distribution of power, with adults controlling the learning process and interactions (Bigner, 1994:56). The issue of 'power' was clearly recognised by the parents in response to storyboard A (authoritative) as they reacted strongly to the negative behaviour of the parent in the story, making the phrase how many times have I told you? negative in intent and effect. However, while the issue of 'power' was evident in storyboard B (authoritarian), with the parent in the story teaching and instructing the child how to spell the name correctly, the parents perceived that the approach taken was more positive as it was 'encouraging,' 'supportive' and 'reassuring'. Whilst the parents related positively to elements of the 'guidance' approach in this storyboard, they still did not recognise that the child was 'passive' in the learning process. Although the parents approved of the 'guidance' approach, it is clear that they were lacking in their understanding of how a child learns as discussed earlier in this paper. Having identified more strongly with the parent's need to correct the mistake, the child's developmental and learning needs were not considered. Consequently, the use of phrase *how many times have I told you* was justified, lost its negative impact, and for some it became positive in intent and effect.

A possible explanation for the confusion is that the parents were swayed by the way the message is transferred to the child. For example, parents 7, 10 and 11 reasoned that the phrase was positive as the parent behaved in a friendly way, paid attention, helped and showed interest in the child. Parent 10 stated:

> *Yes, it's okay to use the phrase here because it was done in a friendly way. The parent said it in a reassuring way so the child will not remember the words, just that the parent cared, turned off the telly and paid attention.*

Only one parent recognised that the parental expectation in the storyboards were too high, commenting that there were 'too many high expectations of the parent, as the child may take five or six times to spell his name right'. Research states that "guidance that is too advanced will be incomprehensible to the child...and...the child will just become frustrated" (Elliott, 1994:8). Thus, unrealistic learning

expectations have a negative effect, causing undue stress to the young child. Studies have shown that didactic learning environments are very stressful to the young child who, because of their developmental level, is unable to sit, listen and pay attention even for short periods of time (Dunn & Kontos, 1997:9). Recent brain research has suggested that prolonged high levels of stress is deleterious to learning, particularly in the first ten years, but especially for young children as "it can destroy neural connections in the brain...and thus...not interferes with new learning, but can also destroy that which already exists" (Milne, 1999:11). The study has highlighted the high adult expectation that the child 'should' listen and pay attention and that the child understands the parent's behaviour and actions.

Unfortunately, "adults often erroneously assume that direct instruction...will make the child a successful reader", writer and so on (NAEYC/NECSSDE, 1991:37). However, traditional teaching approaches of "intensive drill and practice on isolated skills" are developmentally inappropriate, ineffective and can be detrimental to the young child. Research has identified that "many parents prefer a didactic (instructional) approach" (Dunn & Kontos, 1997:7). This places unreasonable demands or expectations that can frustrate preschoolers, and cause negative reactions in future school experiences and beyond (IRA/NAEYC, 1998:31-40; Berk, 1996:335). Interestingly, the same research revealed a prevalence of didactic practices in many early childhood programs and settings such as kindergarten and childcare (Dunn & Kontos, 1997:7). These studies have highlighted that although many early childhood teachers espouse a belief in developmentally appropriate practices, many did not have developmentally appropriate classrooms and were still employing a "didactic and skill oriented" approach (Dunn & Kontos, 1997:7).

If this practice is socially and culturally accepted in Australia, is it fair to expect parents to do otherwise?

Parental communication

The second concern raised from this study was the parents' confusion regarding the way adults communicate with young children. If the perception is that the way is more positive and has more impact, then does it really matter what the parent says to the young child? When there is a mismatch between verbal and nonverbal communication, what messages is the child receiving? How does the child internalise the messages received? Does this impact on the child's development of social and interpersonal skills, and ultimately, self-concept?

Predominantly, in storyboards A (authoritarian) and C (permissive), the phrase *how many times have I told you* was considered to be negative in intent, manner and effect, and thus should not be used. The parents appeared to be influenced by the negative behaviour and body language of the authoritarian and the 'indifferent' permissive parent. Thus, the way the phrase *how many times have I told you* was delivered made it negative in intent and effect from the parents' perceptions. In storyboard B (authoritative), again the parents seemed to be influenced by the positive behaviour and body language of the authoritative parent. As the way was viewed as more positive it created confusion and contradiction in relation to the use of the phrase and its intent and effect. Whilst 50% of parents stated that it was not okay to say the phrase as it had a negative effect, the other 50% said that it was okay to use as it had a positive effect. In this authoritative parenting context, they seemingly reasoned that the way (positive behaviours / body language), compensated for the words, (the negative phrase).

Do parents realise the seriousness of negative feedback on the young child's overall development?

Parental expectations

This study highlighted these higher expectations of parents, as they perceived the child in the three storyboards as not listening and not paying attention to the parent. For example, recurring statements

such as 'the child must be told to make him learn and pay attention to his parent' tend to support the view that there may be a commonly held belief that the child needs to listen if he/she is to learn.

Children need parents who "provide good verbal interaction models to help them learn the verbal interaction skills that help them succeed in...life (Albrecht, 1992:11). Parents need to be aware of the "powerful influence of modeling and other nonverbal communication...as the parent's...actions should be compatible with their verbal messages and confirm that children understand their message" (Bredekamp, 1996:10). Positive communication is based on reciprocity, where verbal give and take is encouraged, and the child's ideas and opinions respected and valued (Marion, 1999; Porter, 1997; Stenhouse, 1994). However, positive verbal interaction skills should be cognisant of the child's developmental level, otherwise "it is easy to attach adult meaning to children's behaviour and to react verbally in potentially damaging ways" (Albrecht, 1992:9). According, to Greenleaf (2000:1) positive verbal interactions comprise of "meaningful dialogues" which are of "heartfelt interest of the child". However, he asserted that on a daily basis the amount of meaningful dialogue that occurs between parent and child "approximates 36 seconds" (Greenleaf, 2000:1). He declared this to be woefully inadequate. Most of what parents say to the child "is in the form of requests, commands, directions, or questions (Stenhouse, 1994:25). Other studies have shown that parents spend more time complaining to their child, and do not spend enough time complimenting, encouraging or supporting their child (Albrecht, 1992:11). However, Hitz & Driscoll (1988:6) argued that "positive comments from significant adults provide important guideposts for children's behaviour...and...that positive comments will, in the long run, be much more helpful to children than negative ones". Furthermore, Landry's (n.d.) research revealed that constant negative and restrictive verbalizations can have a negative impact on a child's social development and competence. Verbal interactions are complicated by the complexity of children's development, in that parent-child interactions have different meanings for the child at different stages of development (Albrecht, 1992:9). In the parent-child microsystem this determines developmental opportunity or risk for the child (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). In parent-child communication, when verbalizations are constantly negative the child is at risk, as the negative feedback is internalized and "marked indelibly" in the child's consciousness, affecting the developing self-concept (Barakat & Clark, 1999; Albrecht, 1992:9).

In this study, the majority of parents identified the phrase *how many times have I told you* as giving 'negative feedback' to the child, making the child feel 'discouraged', 'inferior', 'hurt' and 'a failure', resulting in 'low self-esteem'. Research clearly demonstrates that negative communication such as 'put-downs' and 'threats' have a negative effect on the child (Barakat & Clark, 1999). Bigner (1994:65) asserted that "children can be abused emotionally by verbal remarks that parents make directly or indirectly". Porter (1997) argued that by using sarcasm to put children in their place, parents convey to the child that he or she is a disappointment to them. Furthermore, Dreikurs & Soltz (1995:31) stated that another way is to use words or actions to imply incompetence, and prescribe failure. The phrase *how many times have I told you* is a clear example of this.

Parents understanding of the development of a child's self concept

When parents were asked about their understanding of what self concept meant (question 7), 56% of parents provided an appropriate definition of self-concept. However, when asked at about what age has a child developed most of their self-concept, the parents provided ages ranging from 1 year to 13 years old. Upon collective analysis of questions 7 and 8, only 33% of parents gave both, an appropriate definition of the term 'self-concept' and the approximate age by which it is mostly developed. The remaining 67% of responses were mixed as follows:

- appropriate definition – incorrect age

- correct approximate age — inappropriate definition
- 'I don't know' the term 'self-concept and/or the age when most developed.

As stated earlier in this discussion, research revealed that parents of young children appear to be more concerned about teaching children to count, read and write and to be less concerned about promoting independence or a positive self-concept (Dunn & Kontos, 1997:8). The study highlighted the parents' focus on the spelling mistake and the perception that it needed correcting. Given the parents' confusion and difficulty in answering questions 7 and 8, it appears that indeed mothers and fathers may be more focussed on the development of academic skills, rather than the development of a positive self-concept. Some educators have argued that there is a strong link between self-concept and academic success or failure at school. They have suggested that the development of a positive self-concept in the preschool years should precede the teaching of academic skills, as a positive self-concept is an indicator for later school and life success (Myers-Walls et al., n.d.). The child who develops a negative self-concept is in danger of school failure, delinquency and health problems such as depression and drug addiction (Demoulin, 1999:5; Mustard & McCain, 1999:6).

From the macro to micro, the importance of providing the young child with a positive and nurturing environment cannot be over emphasised. As what we do, as a society today, will have repercussions for our children in the future. If society continues to place high expectations on parents, it then must provide sufficient support to enable them to fulfil their obligations with knowledge, understanding and enjoyment.

IMPLICATIONS

As anticipated, this exploratory pilot study has provided the necessary information to begin to show that parents do not fully understand that even when there are no 'verbal put-downs', the negative inferences and body-language used when saying the phrase *how many times have I told you* can be damaging to a child's developing self-concept.

The implications obtained from this pilot study are numerous. One area of concern that poses developmental risk to the child was the parents' focus upon the child's spelling mistake and the perception that the mistake needed to be corrected. Generally, the parents believed that it was all right and necessary to point out the child's mistakes as the child needed to learn the 'right' way. According to Dreikurs & Soltz (1995:88-102) there is great need for parents to "eliminate criticism and minimise mistakes...our emphasis on mistakes is disastrous...when we pay constant attention to mistakes, we discourage our children. We cannot build on weakness — only on strengths"

The second concern raised from this pilot study, was the parents' confusion regarding the way adults communicate with young children. There appeared to be a discrepancy between what parents' perceptions of the child's capabilities and the child's actual stage of learning and literacy development.

This exploratory pilot study is no different from others in that it has raised more questions than it has answered. Questions that need further research are as follows:

- As it appears that the parents believed that actions speak louder than words, then does this mean negative words, when accompanied with 'positive' behaviour, have little or no effect on the child and the developing self-concept? And does this belief pose developmental opportunity or risk to the child?
- Is the way really more important than the actual words used?

- Is the child being set up for failure because of unrealistic expectations due to the parent's lack of knowledge of child development?
- Is this a macrosystem issue where society's high expectations for 'success' and 'achievement' are filtering down to the child? Is society expecting too much from our young children?
- Why did the parents focus on correcting the mistake? Did this mistake really need to be corrected in the first place? Was this developmentally appropriate?
- If a 'didactic' teaching approach is socially and culturally accepted in Australia, is it fair to expect parents to do otherwise?
- Why do parents of young children appear to be less concerned about promoting independence or a positive self-concept and more concerned about academic learning? Do parents realise the seriousness of negative feedback on the young child's overall development?
- What is the parenting programs communicating to the parents concerning all questions above?

CONCLUSION

In sum, this exploratory pilot study has provided much information about the confusion, contradictions and inconsistencies in the perception of parents about the effects of negative feedback on a young child's developing self-concept. Whilst the majority of the parents identified the negative intent of that phrase, and the negative effect on the child's feelings, many equated positive parental behaviour and body language with having a positive effect on the child, and negative parental behaviour and body language was equated with negative effect. The findings suggested that parents believed that the way the phrase, *how many times have I told you* was delivered had more impact than what was said, which seemingly supported the common belief that 'actions speak louder than words'.

It is evident that generally, the parents were confused, inconsistent and contradictory in their responses. It highlighted the high adult expectation that the child 'should' listen and pay attention and that the child understands the parent's behaviour and actions.

As parents are main role models, especially in early childhood, they are in the best position to influence their children for the better. However, the caregiving style parents adopt and what they consider to be appropriate behaviours and values are influenced by past experiences, tradition, culture and community. At times, parents, pressured by the high expectations of society, adopt inappropriate practices which places the young child at developmental risk. In their mistaken belief, many parents and educators focus on correcting the mistakes young children make and giving negative feedback becomes a habit. However, as constant negative feedback is detrimental to the child's social, emotional and cognitive development, parents and educators alike need to be continually mindful of the way they interact with young children and consciously attempt to be supportive and nurturing by avoiding 'adult double-talk' and the use of negative phrases such as *how many times have I told you.*

This exploratory pilot study has highlighted the need for further parent education in relation to the way mothers and fathers communicate with their children, and the need to raise parental awareness of the impact they have on their child's development of self-concept especially in the first five years. All children need a supportive and friendly environment where caring adults interact with them, using positive communication based on respect, reciprocity, and warmth. As children need clear messages to function in this complex world, adults must assist by 'meaning what they say and saying what they

mean.' The development of the 'total' child must be foremost in the minds of educators and parents and the authoritative caregiving style promoted as the best method in helping young children develop a healthy self-concept.

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Appendix 1: Storyboards

STORYBOARD A

Setting:
Jamie, a five year old, is at home with his/her parent in the lounge room. Jamie is writing whilst the parent is watching television

Story:
Jamie, a 5-year-old, has just finished writing his/her name on a piece of paper and eagerly runs up to show the parent saying, "look, I've written my name!" The parent turns away from the television, looks at the writing, sighs, frowns, and while slowly shaking their head says, "how many times have I told you, that is not how you spell your name".

The parent says, "give me the paper and pencil, and I'll show you how to do it right". After writing the name correctly, the parent hands the pencil and paper to the child and says in a firm way, "now sit here and do it right this time". The parent watches the child, with the television still going in the background.

STORYBOARD B

Setting:
Jamie, a 5-year-old, is at home with his/her parent in the lounge room. Jamie is writing whilst the parent is watching television.

Story:
Jamie, a 5-year-old, has just finished writing his/her name on a piece of paper and eagerly runs up to show the parent saying, "look, I've written my name". The parent turns away from the television, looks at the writing, sighs, and shaking their head in a friendly way, says "how many times have I told you that your name has an 'i' in it".

The parent then says, "come and sit next to me and we can do it together". Turning off the television, the parent smiles at Jamie and suggests that if they practice writing the name together, he/she will get it right.

STORYBOARD C

Setting:
Jamie, a 5-year-old, is at home with his/her parent in the lounge room. Jamie is writing whilst the parent is watching television.

Story:
Jamie, a 5-year-old, has just finished writing his/her name on a piece of paper and eagerly runs up to show the parent saying, "look, I've written my name". The parent turns away from the television, looks at the writing, sighs, shrugs and says, "how many times have I told you, you can do it how you want".

While turning away, the parent says, "you'll get it right one day". The parent then ignores the child and continues to watch television.

Appendix 2: Questions

SECTION ONE

Question 1: What do you think the parent meant in saying,

Question 2: Can you tell me if you think it is OK for the pa
you to the child? Why?

Question 3: In your opinion, do you think the way in whicl
told you, could affect how the child feels? Please explain

SECTION TWO

Question 4: What is your general understanding of the phra

Question 5: Do you think it is more the way the parent giv
parent actually uses, that could affect the child's feeling ab

Question 6: In your opinion, do you think that it is OK to u
told you in private but not in front of others? Why?

Question 7: What do you think the term of self concept me

Question 8: At what age do you think a child has develope

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